MANIFESTO OF A SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

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MANIFESTO OF A SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

A Thesis

by

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Department of Art
Abstract

of

MANIFESTO OF A SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

by

Kari AnnJenae Breese

My experience and discoveries that were reached, as a Masters of Art student at California State University, Sacramento, helped me to understand where my artist origin began, and now what they are evolving into. I have found out in this chapter of my life is that my paintings and I are spiritual warriors. I became a spiritual warrior when I embarked on my journey as an artist. The spiritual warrior uses creativity as a weapon. Creativity is the sword that digs deep within the soul, like a brush about to attack a canvas. This realization will help me formulate my next creative discovery that will further fuel my paintings and development as an artist in our contemporary society.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Ian Harvey, M.F.A

_______________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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To Khalil Chishtee: Who wafted in like wind. With his stories and words he inspired me on many levels. He believes that art should be about what is inside, about passion, love, and being authentic in making paintings. He raised questions regarding creating and asked why. He had a way of eloquently seeing and knowing immediately what was missing, stating what he saw in a poetic and beautiful manner of speaking. His words are timeless, and are imbedded in my soul.

To Elaine O’Brien: Whom I deeply admire for her intellect, generosity and poise. She has opened many doors to explore. She opened my eyes to art in the larger context in the world. She encouraged me to push beyond my own doubts of my mental capacity and in-turn I gained a deeper understanding of my intellectual and analytical process.

To the entire faculty: I thank you so much. I will never forget this experience at California State University, Sacramento. You have all enriched my art and my life.
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MANIFESTO OF A SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

Like most people my life’s journey has been circuitous and rarely in my control. Also, like most, my life experiences have amalgamated into the behavioral stew that is me. Of course, genetics have also played some role in shaping who I am, but it seems that genes have more to do with physical propensity than with my attitudes and actions.

When difficulties in my learning abilities began to manifest themselves at an early age, coupled with life-threatening health events, I found myself in a dizzying world of aptitude and medical tests. While my life was almost entirely in the hands of others I had few choices about what I could do at any given moment, with one notable exception.

I could add color where there was none. I could make shapes that were of no particular import or interest to anyone. I now know that color and form are fundamental elements of art. All I remember about that distant past is that at a young age I was hooked on putting color into forms – usually more outside of the lines than inside. Because I spent a good deal of time isolated from normal play activities, I found comfort in turning inward to explore a made-up world of forms and colors.

Imagine spending years experiencing varying degrees of isolation, academic frustration, and physical challenges during forays into the greater world. After these unpleasant trips I would inevitably retreat back into my world of invention where I could put color into forms. These forms often had meaning only to me. If you are making images by yourself, and for yourself, who’s to say it is not art? At least for me, it was certainly an essential source of refuge.
What was to eventually become my “art” always made more sense to me than the annoying chatter of a small army of special educators who were trying to ready me for life in the backwaters of food service. Somewhere in the midst of the hand wringing, “shall we hold you back or just quietly pass you through” debates, I decided to declare war. It began as a quiet, personal war. I was able to enlist some “soldiers” in the form of a few enlightened educators, some caring family members and a very few dedicated medical types.

My quiet war was fueled by an “I’ll show you,” spirit that was giving me confidence as I succeeded where academic failure was predicted. My personal feelings were further buoyed when I heard others refer to my color and form projects as art. I began to feel an internal warrior begin to stir. Could I express my feelings and frustrations on a smooth surface? Was I really making art?

My art, such as it was, one day took the form of paintings. I was well beyond crayons and markers, though they can be powerful tools in art making. So, were my paintings becoming art? I don’t think there was any magical boundary I crossed to become an artist, it was more that others recognized that something was going on with my form and color. My work became art when I understood it was connected to my past. My past life experiences combined with improving techniques gave me the skill to move from my early scribbles to artistic creations.

I have created a visual vocabulary, a veritable dictionary of life’s images that is compiled directly from my personal memories and emotions that I extract from experience. The
images I chose were symbolic. These personal icons hold meanings that accumulate at particular moments in my life. I experienced situations that led me along a path to an awakening. There were times when, much like Sisyphus who was sentenced to push a large rock up a large hill only to have it fall back to the bottom forever, I felt I would never find a place where I could park that big old ugly rock that represented my life. As I continue to uncover and further understand the downs and ups of my life, somewhat like Sisyphus, the paintings will continue to unfold, enriched by life’s battles.

Conventional wisdom says there is more to life than a few battles. Life is supposed to be a blend of many highs and few lows. That is a lot of crap if you are trapped under the pall of a life-threatening disease that feels like a rock crushing you. And if, after miracle of miracles, you survive, you either get tough and get strong and push the rock out of your way or you roll over and become defeated, deflated and give up all hope. Even after you survive the physical agony of a painful disease, all is not automatically smooth sailing. If you are put on the dreaded “little bus” for all the kids to see at school then, either your ego will get trounced, or you just don’t have an ego in the first place (and probably belong on the little bus). So I elected early on to do battle, stand my ground, figure things out, push that rock out of the way and lead the charge. At some point I realized that I had to be a warrior and my fighting spirit had to take charge if the whole person I wanted to be was to prevail.

Unlike Sun Tzu in his classic *The Art of War*, I did not pre-think or construct any strategies for dealing with the situations in which I found myself. I had no plan or list of resources from which to choose. Life came at me as it does. Sometimes I ducked and
sometimes I fell. So I had to find a way to deal with the confusion and distortion of being trapped in the world of the so-called learning-disabled. I needed to find ways to cope with unknown obstacles, innuendo, bullying, misconceptions, debilitating authority figures and cognitive dissonance in every room. I had no idea about how to apply simple, rational tactics in order to win in the head-on bloody battles that the venerable General Tzu worked out 2,600 years ago. After all Tzu had never tried to take on the San Juan Unified School District.

I now know that, at a tender age with no military training and no resources to speak of, I was in a pitched battle for my very self. There was no expert to consult; they already had all the experts lined up against me. The professionals were in agreement I was to be given “special” treatment. It was like being trapped in a tautological loop that I could see but could not escape. I was not going to win a logical ring of fire discussion against the pyromaniac educators who were slowly encircling me.

When all was said and done, the answer was simple, and elegant. I couldn’t win the fight to prove I was actually more capable than their “special” testing seemed to prove. So, a little bit like Sun Tzu, I shifted my strategy from trying to win the war by frontal attacks on their testing methods to a strategy of winning smaller battles. My battleground was in the ethereal, the existential, the expression of self and the finding of forms – the twilight zone of art that was beyond the comprehension of educational administrators. I found the area in which I could shine: art.

In retrospect I think it was more that art had found me. Art surrounded me with endless possibilities and delightful ambiguities that are difficult to put into words. I found a way
to don an armor that had no weight much like the gossamer coverings of a spiritual warrior. I could employ any weapon or no weapon at all. I could not lose the battle because I removed the battleground. I began the painfully ecstatic process of preparing for the war “they” would never understand. Clad in my newly found trappings, I flew beyond their Scantron realities into a free-fall spin of color, light, no light, a screaming cacophony of sound and no sound at all. For me the brush was mightier than the pencil.

My art today is confirmation that I have been a spiritual warrior for a long time. Over time my paintings have constructed a narrative of my development as a warrior. All warriors share one common element: the need to prevail. The methods used to win are drastically different from warrior to spiritual warrior. Conventional warriors use weapons of form and mass with specific uses, like cutting and rending to win. Spiritual warriors, many of whom have already kissed death, are not about the physical slash and burn win but more desirous of a controlled, purposeful and long lasting win. In my role as a spiritual warrior I have fought hypocrisy and the homogenized educational standards that were used to justify the attempt to sentence me to a life of quiet desperation.

Like many spiritual warriors my life’s circumstance led me to make the choice to be a warrior. I started on my life journey as a soldier. I did as I was ordered to do. I was a child soldier. I obeyed orders assigned by doctors, teachers and other authority figures. I thought I had to be a soldier to survive. I first enlisted when I was around seven years old while facing a serious medical problem. In 1986 I had open chest surgery, called a Thymectomy. It was a necessity for survival, not a choice. Though I was still a “soldier” at that time and didn’t know anything about spiritual warriors, this medical procedure
would be a traumatic event in my life that would later provide the inspiration to launch my spiritual warrior in the form of a painting entitled *Surgical Lancet*, 2008 (figure 1). This is one of the first paintings fueled by my open chest surgery. It is a large painting (77 inches by 85 inches, oil on canvas) that appears to be a landscape. There is a strong, orange horizontal cliff, representing a lancet or surgical knife. The horizontal form expands across the canvas, symbolizing the intrusion of a surgical procedure. Under the form is an underworld with hues that are dark, muted browns and purples. Accompanying the dark and murky hues, images of a torso and a beetle emerge, representing death. Above the lancet form there are brighter colors, such as orange, red and green that are reflecting off the lancet. The saturation in the forms in the field above the lancet stands in high contrast to the lancet and the underworld. Organic shapes and lines represent life and rebirth. There is a vague reference to a leg that hides under the organic forms. The leg represents the drive to keep living, to keep walking one foot in front of the other, and the drive to keep recreating oneself.

I constructed many paintings exploring what the internal body may look like on a microscopic level. These are not realistic depictions, but imagined interpretations of an internal reality of the human body. In my painting, *Alternation in Structure* 2008 (Figure 2), I created a space using abstract interpretations of body organs such as the stomach, heart and intestine. The images of human anatomy that I use are symbolizing the elimination of waste from the body. These organ-like forms that resemble a satchel, symbolize the containment of waste before the body’s elimination process. Symbolically speaking, when we eliminate unneeded waste from our body, or our life, we become
clean of the hazardous materials that are infecting us. After the process of eliminating, we are ready to start over; we are cleaned, reborn and, healthy. The application of paint is runny like the fluid contained in the body. The paint is built up slowly in layers with heavy brush strokes and finally with thicker paint that has been manipulated with a palette knife. The use of duller and darker hues reflects an ominous quality that represents the internal mystery of the body, and the unknown processes of organ failure and death.

I continued to explore paintings that contained human anatomy. I moved to a more realistic approach depicting the forms of the internal body in the painting, *Allow Passage*, 2008 (figure 3). Specific body parts are used to explore the relationship of more representational versus less representational. Organs, such as the stomach and intestines, are painted with the intent of being more realistic, whereas the colon and the field behind the anatomy are abstracted. The abstracted field simulates an atmosphere of mist, representing the unknown. Once again, these are depicting the elimination of hazardous waste from the body, and the rebirth of a healthy being.

After my open chest operation, I had a complete blood transfusion. I was a fighter, although I was not sure what I was fighting for, other than life. When these medical treatments were done I had become a solider. As I matured, I gained insight and discovered I really was not a soldier. I now know that I was a warrior in search of a spirit.

During my first semester in the MA program at CSU, Sacramento I painted an emotional response to my surgical experience, *(Feeding the Endangered, 2008, Figure 4)*. I used
images of a California condor, a massive pre-historic bird that evolved for survival. The condor is a warrior. Growing up I felt a great kinship with this bird. I thoroughly researched these magnificent birds. I found that due to poaching and the depletion of their environment, they were close to extinction. In 1987, a year after my chest surgery, there were only 22 condors in existence. I even saved my allowance money to help save them. As a conservation attempt, preservationists captured these birds and placed them in captivity. They were ordered by officials to be held captive. They were caught against their will, but they were still warriors. The condors finally propagated enough to be released back into the wild.

I learned that in Native American cultures the California condor was a mythical animal, often used in rituals and ceremonies. The Shamans gained powers from condors that allowed them to suck supernatural poisons from their patients. (There is an interesting connection between my complete blood transfusion, when all of my blood was removed, filtered and returned to my body, and the powers attributed to the great condor.) The condor is a revered creature, that is associated with death and mourning as well as rebirth and renewal, they can give power to humans.

Additional imagery used in this painting includes a human skeleton that is connected by tubes that plug into the condor. This symbolizes a blood transfusion. I was connected to a machine, which purified my blood and circulated it back into my body. I am the skeleton figure in the painting. The condor is feeding me blood to survive. At the same time I am feeding the condor blood for its survival. This painting, *Feeding the Endangered*, is large at 84 inches x 72 inches. The very large size is essential in order to create a more direct
relation with the viewer. The condor is slightly facing the viewer and, due to its size, is
gazing down at the viewer. The condor is challenging the viewer to meet his gaze.
Though somewhat obscured by the camouflage surrounding it, the skeleton is facing the
condor, asking, and possibly pleading, for the condor’s help. The condor and skeleton are
larger than life and symbolize the massive strength we need to overcome being
endangered. The condor population was at the brink of extinction; I was close to
becoming extinct. The condor’s spirit was streaming through my very being when I
connected my physical transfusion to my connection with the condor.
I was held back in school for having dyslexia, and other unknown learning disabilities.
Teachers became officers, and other children were not fellow soldiers, but combat
enemies. I was a lone soldier who had to keep defending my intelligence. It was at this
time I became a warrior. I knew how to play the role of the soldier; it was an easier way
of existing, and the only way I knew. I was aware I had dyslexia, although I did not have
a complete understanding of what that term meant. I knew I did not belong in a special
education class.
In 2008 I made a painting titled, Brain Transition, (Figure 5) which was an abstraction
relating to my learning deficiencies. There is a strong horizon line, the sky is a vibrant
orange, and the ground is a diluted green. The orange represents my belief in my
intelligence. The orange is strong and unyielding, possessing great potential. The green
represents my educator’s belief in my inability to learn. The green is murky and obscured
by free-flowing organic lines, symbolizing brain pathways that are my attempt to move
beyond the perception of my teachers. These pathways are coming out of the orange. The
pathways are organic, free-flowing lines painted with bright colors to complement and exaggerate the orange. I have been deeply affected by the lack of faith others had in my intelligence. This perception became a driving force to fight and achieve what others thought I could not do: learn. The drive and passion for proving myself to be capable and intelligent made me a warrior.

I was placed in a back brace ordered by authority figures. At the time I was still a soldier in the service of some amorphous chain of command. I was not allowed to go on “military leave” like other soldiers but had to stay in the field and wear an unwieldy, incredibly embarrassing uniform in the form of a back brace. Cruelty and bullying don’t even begin to describe the hell other soldier students put me through. I had no choice but to fight. At the time I could not imagine that the back brace from hell would contribute so much to my eventual conversion from soldier to spiritual warrior.

In retrospect the back brace provided the first break-through in my paintings and in my journey to become a spiritual warrior. As an undergraduate the back-brace paintings were the first body of work that contain visual vocabulary and content that directly portray my experience, yet still speak to the viewer. Between 2007 and 2008, I made 12 large-scale oil paintings (Figures 6-7) to depict the pain, the emotional dishevelment and alienation I experienced while wearing the contraption. The brace would not allow me to move as other children could. I could not run or play during recess, I had to stand still and wait for the bell to ring and, finally, be ordered back into class. I was a soldier but I wanted to escape from the restraint and an on-going military-like childhood.
In the series of back-brace paintings I painted images of fish hanging vertically, (figure 9) alongside the figure in the back brace. The fish suggest dullness and a lack of expression. I was dull and revealed little expression in order to protect myself while wearing a back brace. Fish have scales similar to armor, and are commonly thought of as cold and odd. I was a fish out of the water. I was an oddity. The other children were cold to me. I used muddy and murky washed-out colors to evoke an emotional response associated with alienation that came with the uniform of the back brace.

In some of the back-brace paintings I attached strings to the figures’ (figure 8) bodies. Although the figures are wearing the brace they have strings that pull on their flesh, creating an elastic bondage that keeps the figure in her place. The elasticity allows the figure to move, but the movement is minimal. If she were to move too far there will be pain and the strings will keep pulling her back into place. The warrior within is coming out and these paintings provide inspiration to speak from the pain of being constrained, the rage of feeling perpetually controlled and the frustration of being unable to be like other children. When wearing the back brace I felt anger. Although I was the one that was physically affected I felt that I had no say in this event. Awareness of my anger and resentment to the brace provided me with an authentic way to feel emotion. I began to allow myself to have an emotion. The emotion was a meld of all my pent-up feelings. I started to form opinions of my own, something I was never allowed, or never allowed myself to have. My opinion was that an unanswered question was infinitely unfair.

During the third semester in the MA degree program, I started to become aware of peoples’ influence over me. I understood when people were putting me in the role of the
soldier. When my inner warrior came out they reacted defensively, and tried to place me back into the soldier role. Rather than relating to them I faced their apprehension of my transformation. Our “will” is a gift, and it is a great disservice to allow other people to dictate who we are.

With this realization, starting in 2009-2010, my paintings changed as well (figure’s 10-15). I started to add architectural references referring to the constraints of walls and to the boxes people put us in. I painted flattened-out planes depicting walls we must break down in order to move forward. Ladders were placed in random directions to represent the struggle to get out of the mandated soldier role. Some of these elements meandered sideways to symbolize inner conflict and the search to find the correct path. Others move upward showing a way to escape to a more fulfilling and authentic way of living.

During my final semester in the MA program I became keenly aware that I have been a warrior my whole life, even if at times I only played the role of a soldier. Events happened this semester that pointed to this realization. I experienced a home invasion, various rejections, and multiple deaths. These life situations were challenging, yet all these experiences made me aware of my inner strength and honesty. My paintings changed along with these realizations. I painted more directly. I created a dialog between my painting and myself (figure’s 16-18). Within my paintings my use of imagery and technical approaches became an altered cumulative collection from past paintings. I gathered many tools in order to cultivate questions I wanted to bring to the viewing audience. With my technical skills heightened, through the help of my mentors, I was able to start to develop paintings that used all the skills I have learned.
I began to use architecture in a different mode. The paintings carried forms of dilapidated buildings dissipating into the mist. The architectural focus became less important in comparison to the work completed the prior semester. After that semester I was able to see past the constraints of the walls and the obstructions, and see that there is far more in life waiting to be discovered. As the walls came down this represented the death of the soldier and her rebirth in a new form. The organic forms became more forceful, shifting to the center of focus. Windows and doors float in the composition, exposing an illuminated world, a new future waiting.

In this new work, the color palette is saturated in the foreground. Some images, such as the organic forms (the soul), emerge with intense reds. Fluorescent oranges and brilliant blue hues illuminate the architectural references. This represents a new self who is coming through. Iridescent paint is incorporated into the far-ground showing a world that is infinite and full of possibilities. This is an entirely different mode of painting. Rather than building form representing my physical body, I started to invent images that are symbolic of my mind, and my spirit.

Through this process of making work I begin to understand what I am as an individual. The use of organic forms refers to me, and also references the intestinal activity of elimination. The elimination refers to the act of freeing myself from what others believe me to be. In some paintings these forms are strong and bright, showing fortitude. In other paintings the organic forms are weak and lack focus, showing struggle and confusion.

My paintings and I are spiritual warriors. I became a spiritual warrior when I embarked on my journey as an artist. The spiritual warrior uses creativity as a weapon. Creativity is
the sword that digs deep within the soul, like a brush about to attack a canvas. The tools I need to maintain my life as a spiritual warrior have taken form, and have become more clear every day. I have no idea where my journey will take me, and what contingencies I will encounter, but alongside me, my painting will continue on this path. We are not mere soldiers marching to the same beat, in the same line, obeying the same rules. Together my paintings and I are spiritual warriors ready to take on the world, with all the sadness, the passion, the love and, the possibilities yet to come.
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Kari Breese, *Surgical Lancet*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 77”x85”
Figure 2
Kari Breese, *Alternation in Structure*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 48”x60”

Figure 3
Kari Breese, *Allowing Passage*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 48”x60”
Figure 4
Kari Breese, *Feeding the Endangered*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 72”x84”
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Kari Breese, *Brain Transition*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 64”x84”
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Kari Breese, *Supporting the Weak*, 2008, Oil on Canvas, 47"x36"

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